

Three Ripples from the Arab Spring

Written by Shashank Joshi

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SHASHANK JOSHI, APR 4 2011

It is extraordinarily difficult to make sense of events in North Africa and the Middle East as they continue to unfold. In late 1978, as protests against modernising, yet unpopular, governments mounted in both Iran and Afghanistan, few would have understood the scale of the Islamist wave that would sweep the region over the following decade. Over three decades on, we are seeing a series of revolutions and proto-revolutions whose pace, connectivity, and breadth have no parallel in modern history other than that triggered by the European revolutions of 1989 as the Soviet Union collapsed.

Though it may be impossible to say whether resilient and flexible regimes – like Syria and Jordan – will survive unscathed, or whether Libya will go the way of Iraq into potential balkanisation and civil war, one can at least pick out some less-noted but far-reaching implications.

Cairo's Renewal

First, we are seeing subtle changes in the distribution of power and prestige. Egypt, after a post-revolutionary spell in which it led the Arab world in three wars against Israel and forged a short lived unification with Syria, had slid into a diplomatic backwater. This was not just a function of peace with Israel, though Cairo's voice was never as loud or resonant after 1978 as it had been in the heady days of the war of attrition from 1967 to 1970, or the perversely celebrated defeat of 1973. Even afterwards, Egypt's position sunk as the state found that national-socialist ideas had little ideological or economic purchase on its citizenry.

Even with Mubarak gone, a military junta remains in charge and constitutional amendments – overwhelmingly approved – will not cure either maladministration or an overweening military-industrial complex. Worse still, Egypt lacks the single greatest advantage of what were nascent democracies in Central and Eastern Europe – the lure of the EU, a powerful engine of norm diffusion and reform whose effectiveness is scandalously neglected.

But all this said, Egypt's next president will be profoundly more in tune with his people (the gendered pronoun is sadly unavoidable) than any of his predecessors. That means not just a more nationalist and independent politics, more akin to Pakistan and Turkey than Qatar or Jordan, but also a proud and likely respected voice on the Middle Eastern stage that will re-take its rightful place alongside Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Sectarian Cold Wars

Second, the uprisings will buffet the region's perpetual Sunni-Shia cold war in different ways. In the years after 2001, Iran – leading a putative Shia camp – looked ascendant. Its long-time adversaries in Afghanistan (the Saudi-backed Taliban) and Iraq (the Sunni Baath regime led by Saddam Hussein) were toppled, and Israeli over-reach in Lebanon and Gaza strengthened the stature and confidence of Iranian allies Hamas and Hezbollah.

This trend will not suddenly reverse. Iran still enjoys the singular advantage of choosing the pace of advancement of its nuclear programme to achieve a quiet and implicit deterrent without provoking what would be a profoundly self-defeating attack by the US or Israel. And the protests by Bahrain's Shia majority, implausibly tarred as Iranian fifth columnists by the Sunni Gulf monarchs, furnishes Tehran with a new grievance around which it can build a Syrian-

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Lebanese-Iraqi diplomatic coalition to grandstand and thereby divert attention from its own protests, the worst since the abortive Green Revolution in 2009.

But in Syria, Bashar al-Assad is in a weaker position than he appears. Despite ruling alongside hardliners (next to whom he can appear a reformist of sorts), unrest has permeated even within regime strongholds. If the army repeated the Hama massacre of 1982 it would silence protests for days, but would unleash a wave of grievance that, unlike post-Tiananmen China, it would have no hope of containing in the longer-term. Syria's Sunni majority is not poised to usurp the instruments of power, but their increased influence in domestic and foreign policy would be a blow to Iran's ambitions. The great danger is that Iran responds to these changes – including the provocative Gulf Cooperation Council force in Bahrain itself – with the sponsorship of armed movements. That would wrench sectarian cleavages further apart and ensure that no constitutional settlement could take hold.

The Model Democrats

Third, and finally, what are the models for change? Are there plausible images of Egypt's or Libya's futures? The regimes undergoing upheaval differ radically. Libya has none of the civilisational profile and history of regional leadership present in Egypt; it has no respected and cohesive national army, nor a civil society that was managed and contorted – but not destroyed – by the government.

Egypt can look to both Turkey and Pakistan. In 1960, Turkey underwent its first military coup. Pakistan, that same year, formalised its first coup that had taken place two years earlier. After decades of democratic flickers and sporadic backsliding, Turkey has fashioned what looks to be a vibrant, functioning, and perhaps influential marriage of political Islam and democracy under the occasional thumb of a powerful military. Pakistan has utterly failed to come to terms with any of these things.

But Turkey is a non-Arab power, and one whose stature in the Arab world has grown significantly only in the past five years. If Egypt can replicate the experience, this will have profound demonstration effects on civil society activists and political organisations in each direction – both westward in North Africa and eastward towards the Gulf. Those societies in which tribal and regional fractures inflect political alliances, such as Libya or Yemen, cannot as easily travel this road.

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The three aforementioned points of focus are neither the only, nor the most important, dimensions of change. Revolutionary change is hard to understand, but – as 1989 showed – it is even harder to predict. In the unlikely event that the House of Saud were to dissolve in the face of internecine sectarian and tribal civil conflict, each of these predictions would be washed away. If Libya's opposition are as broad-based and democratic as they claim, and Gaddafi's revolutionary travesty is replaced with an enduring and legitimate political system, North Africa's possibilities would be transformed at a stroke.

Yet whatever transpires in Libya, political tectonic waves are shifting. In the coming years, Cairo will rediscover its stature and voice; the Arab world's sectarian cold war will move into a dangerous period; and aspirant democrats will search for models of their own, first Turkey, but perhaps eventually, Egypt.

Shashank Joshi is a doctoral student of international relations at the Department of Government at Harvard University, and an Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London.